

## BETSY LEVY PALUCK

Did you know that nearly a quarter of middle and high school students have been bullied?<sup>1</sup> Counting only high school enrollment, that's nearly 4 million bullied students!<sup>2</sup> The impact of bullying on students is well known, ranging from increased absenteeism, to poor performance, to increased risk of suicide.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, NSF-funded psychologist Betsy Levy Paluck and her research team developed a program that can reduce school bullying by up to 25 percent.

Paluck, a Professor of Psychology at Princeton University, partnered with 56 New Jersey middle schools to test the social psychology theory that people tend to comply with socially accepted behaviors in a group. In short, individuals learn desirable community behaviors by observing and interacting with other group members. Moreover, certain group members are more influential than others.



Photo Credit: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Paluck and her team capitalized on these notions by finding the most influential members among New Jersey middle school students. The researchers surveyed nearly 25,000 students, asking them to identify peers that they liked and spent the most time with, both in person and on-line.<sup>4</sup> The survey results identified the most influential students, known as social referents, in a particular peer group, such as a drama club or sports team.

Next, a combination of social referents and regular students were invited (not required) to participate in a conflict mitigation program developed by Paluck's team. In addition to encouraging students to identify the areas of conflict they could address at their school, the program offered campaign materials, such as slide templates, to help students spread the word about anti-conflict behaviors. "We didn't give them a manual written by adults [announcing], 'just say no to bullying,'" Paluck observed.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the students controlled the message, creating social media hashtags, flyers, and other media. "We treated students as politicians, campaigning for a better school," she said. "The theory was that [students'] public behaviors and statements could change [accepted behaviors for the whole community]."<sup>6</sup>

Paluck's theory became practice. Schools using her program reported up to a 25 percent decrease in reported conflict incidents, compared to schools not using her curriculum.<sup>7</sup>



While reducing conflict, the research uncovered surprising insights into the nature of bullying and conflict resolution. For instance, there is strong evidence that students believe conflict behaviors are normal, acceptable, even desirable, within their community.<sup>8</sup> Thus, teaching students, particularly those influential social referents, about conflict mediation introduces a “new” normal behavior aimed at reducing conflict.

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Paluck’s ability to translate social psychology theory into positive behavioral change helped her to win a MacArthur Fellowship in 2017. Her complete conflict remediation program, dubbed *Roots*, is freely available at <http://www.betsylevypaluck.com/roots-curriculum/>. With thoughtful implementation, Paluck’s program may bring relief to millions of bullied students.

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<sup>1</sup> “Facts About Bullying,” *StopBullying.Gov*, HHS, Sept. 28, 2017.

<https://www.stopbullying.gov/media/facts/index.html#stats>

<sup>2</sup> “Fast Facts: Back to School Statistics,” Natl. Center for Education Statistics, Dept. of Ed., n.d. Data for 2018 enrollment. Statistics not available for middle school only (grades 6-8, ages 11-13). Calculated at 25% of 15.1 million high school students = 3.76 million students being bullied. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>

<sup>3</sup> “Effects of Bullying,” *StopBullying.Gov*, HHS, Sept. 12, 2017. <https://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/effects/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> “Changing climates of conflict: A social network experiment in 56 schools.” Paluck, Shephard, and Aronow. *PNAS*, Jan. 4, 2016. <https://www.pnas.org/content/113/3/566>

<sup>5</sup> “Princeton researcher who tackled bullying windows MacArthur ‘genius’ award. Tom Avril, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct. 12, 2017. <https://www.philly.com/philly/health/macarthur-genius-betsy-paluck-bullying-jersey-middle-school-princeton-20171012.html>

<sup>6</sup> “Peer-led Anti-Bullying Efforts Yield Payoffs,” Sarah D. Sparks, *EducationWeek*, Sept. 13, 2016. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/09/14/peer-led-anti-bullying-efforts-lead-payoffs.html>

<sup>7</sup> “Changing climates of conflict: A social network experiment in 56 schools.” Paluck, Shephard, and Aronow. *PNAS*, Jan. 4, 2016. <https://www.pnas.org/content/113/3/566>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

